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## Utopia and Progress: The Case of Thomas Paine's Apocalypse

**Abstract:** One of the overlooked aspects of political utopianism is the mechanism which brings about the utopia. What brings about the change from the ordinary politics of the present to the utopian state? For Thomas Paine the change is apocalyptic. Paine's later writing testifies to the sudden birth of reason in the world and foresees its sweeping effect over individual human minds and human societies. He describes reason as an irresistible revelation, an apocalypse. Evaluating the American and French revolutions, Paine identifies the mechanism of change as the rational apocalypse itself. On the one hand, this mechanism of change shatters the coherence of Paine's comprehensive thought. On the other, Paine's utopianism is both thought-provoking and cautionary. To what extent can reason enlighten individuals to their true interests in harmony with others? To what extent do utopian plans for society rely on something miraculous or apocalyptic to change human consciousness? Should political utopianism purport to fix the problems of the world *now*, or is it primarily a device for imagining a better world which future generations might slowly construct?

**Keywords:** Thomas Paine, Utopia, Apocalypse, Progress

Utopian thought and progressive political theory have an intrinsic likeness that can conceal fundamental differences. Both do aim at a better world. What often distinguishes them is the means of bringing about that better world and whether or not that future world is merely “better” or ultimately “perfect.” These differences are important for reasons of politics and theory. Losing sight of them can lead to misguided policies in the pursuit of progress and dashed expectations in the hopes of perfection. A case in point is that of Thomas Paine. On the one hand, Thomas Paine is a recognized utopian thinker (Jendrysik 139-40; Foner 16, 75). On the other, he is acknowledged as a progressive thinker ahead of his time (Ayer; Hitchens; Fruchtman “Political Philosophy”). Unfortunately, he cannot be both. This problem in the literature reflects the underlying theme of this inquiry: how to differentiate utopianism from progressivism.

The trick is that much of progressive political thought is utopian. Thinkers and theorists from Auguste Comte and H. G. Wells to Karl Marx and Eduard Bernstein to have developed systems of political thought in which reason is applied to the problems of human society, gradually solving one after another, and over time improving the lives and living conditions of human beings. Some of these systems end in perfection (Marx) and some never seem to end at all (Wells), but all aim at creating a better world and explaining how that better world can be achieved. The concept of the “agency of transformation” is key to differentiating a system of progressive politics from a merely visionary utopia (Kateb 16). Allow me to elaborate. In Marxism, simply understood, the laws of history and economics will bring about a better world. There is no room to dispute these laws and there is no ultimate rebellion against them. Throughout history, the laws of economics and class struggle determine the ways which human beings live. They are a deterministic agency of transformation (or better, a mechanism of

transformation). In Wells's utopia, human reason can be applied to ameliorate and even solve problems and afflictions in society. Reason can resolve the strife among societies. There is some leeway for human error in the application of reason, and if reason will be applied at all. Furthermore, there may never be a total resolution of all human problems, and thus no perfect state in the future. Regardless, the progressive design of Wells is utopian in that it is the best achievable, and certainly better than the past or present conditions of human social organization. Take note that in these examples of progressive-utopian thought, the agency or mechanism of transformation is clearly explained.

Another genre of utopian thought avoids the mechanism of transformation almost entirely. Thomas More's *Utopia* and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* for example, employ fictional societies as a means of critiquing their actual societies. These fictional realms provide a model, an exemplar, of how a society ought to be; however, the authors do not explain how those societies came to be. More writes his Utopia into existence. Likewise, Bacon pens his fictional New Atlantis into the reality of ink. Neither explain how these societies came into being, nor do they explain how their own societies might be transformed into the utopian model. These literary utopias differ in that particular regard- the absence of a mechanism of transformation- from the progressive utopias. This is not to say that one is superior to another, but only to point to the difference with a purpose in mind.

Thomas Paine, as mentioned, appears to exemplify this progressive-utopian political mindset. At least, some of his recommended policies (public education, increased trade among nations, financial security for the elderly) have been adopted over time and are generally recognized as producing a better society. On the surface, Paine falls into the category of a

progressive-utopian thinker. However, the mechanism of transformation upon which Paine relies is fundamentally irrational. In fact, it is downright apocalyptic! The problem of Paine's apocalypse may well create difficulties in progressive-utopian thought in general. Ultimately, progressive-utopian thought relies on the unfailing power of human reason to bring about a better future and a better world. This belief itself might be irrational, and reflect only half of the power of human reason.

The question has been asked: "Is Tom Paine a utopian political thinker?" The question has been answered in the affirmative: Yes, Paine is a utopian (Jendrysik; Foner). Though I agree with this conclusion, it requires an immediate qualification. The recent position that Thomas Paine's collected works are a coherent philosophical and theological program (Fruchtman "Political Philosophy") is simply untenable. The shift from the orthodox but non-denominational Christianity of *Common Sense* to the deism of *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason* cleaves Paine's thought in two. Indeed, Paine's reliance on the fundamental Christian belief in original sin stands in stark and irreconcilable contrast to his defense of reason and perfectibility in later essays. The early Paine cannot be utopian, for he echoes the belief that sin cannot be cured in this world, but the later Paine is clearly not a Christian and clearly a utopian.

After that qualification, a deeper problem exists within Paine's utopian vision. At the foundational level, his theological beliefs, his recounting of history, and his revolutionary political action cannot be reconciled. More intriguing than this division of thought is how Paine's utopianism follows from- and yet clashes within- his deism, especially the mechanism of change to bring about the utopian future. Investigating the following question reveals a deep problem in Paine's own thought: Thomas Paine cannot rationalize the emergence of a utopian society into a

world of ignorance and vice while holding constant the natural laws and universal human equality characteristic of deism. The result is that Paine, unwittingly, puts forth a miracle to bridge the divide: the apocalyptic birth of reason.

## 1. Mechanisms of Utopia

In any utopian political scheme, the thinker must elaborate the agency or mechanism of transformation that enables the change from the flawed present to the perfected future. For example, Plato, at the political heart of the *Republic*, proposed a radical reform of education to forge the ideal city (Klosko; Reeve). Correct education, under the supervision of philosopher-kings, is the mechanism to transform a political community into Plato's utopia. Offering a different mechanism of political change, Marx hypothesized that the engine of history was economic class struggle. Factors within capitalism itself would create the proletariat, the industrial machinery, and the class consciousness to secure a communist utopia. Both thinkers posited processes of rational change and elaborated the mechanisms underlying their utopian schemes- and both fit within their respective philosophies. On the other hand, Thomas More, in *Utopia*, details the ideal society of the Utopians, but does not explain how they arrived at their condition. Investigations into Thomas Paine's political philosophy and overarching theology have neglected the mechanism of change within his thought, which is unfortunate, for Paine's thought attempts to hold an untenable paradox.

Within the political writings of Thomas Paine, the mechanism of change is brief, poetic, and obscure; when discovered, the mechanism is not credible within the belief system of his own deism. Illuminated, the mechanism reveals deep problems in Paine's theology and subsequent

political philosophy. The crux of the issue resides in his later writings, where the firebrand pamphleteer briefly describes a mechanism of change that I can only describe as the apocalypse of reason. I use this term “apocalypse of reason” to capture what Paine defend as the causal factor responsible for the political, social, and economic revolutions sweeping the world, and that very apocalypse produces intractable problems in his body of writing.

In his early work, most popularly in *Common Sense*, Paine articulates the basic Christian tenets of original sin and human fallibility. He used those tenets with exceptional skill to defend democracy and demolish the legitimacy of monarchy and hereditary rule. Moving past Christianity in his later essays, Paine embraced the perfectibility of human nature through the faculty of reason. Clearly expressed in these later writings, this state of future perfection markedly contrasts with Paine’s account of human history, which teems with ignorance, deception, violence, and oppression. This is the great difficulty for Paine: how are human beings, who have been so prone to ignorance and violence throughout history, to overthrow their vices entirely and establish a new rational order in the world? To create the groundwork for a new, utopian society, and to explain the rapid and radical change in human behavior that he reports to observe, Paine subtly posits an apocalypse, an event of sudden awakening and fundamental enlightenment in the human mind. This awakened faculty of reason will guide human beings to their true and harmonious interests. Over a short time, conflict and deception will cease as reason dictates individual behavior and social organization. I must stress the short interlude that Paine described before the utopia would bloom. Paine was not thinking that rational thought slowly, over many generations, gradually would improve human societies. Some recent research (Jendrysik; Hitchens) in Paine’s political program has been too generous in noting that

contemporary societies have endorsed and enacted social programs endorsed by Paine. Though true, that same research overlooks that Paine thought the process of social reorganization would occur rapidly in his own lifetime. Thomas Paine was not foreseeing the development of the modern social welfare state two centuries into the future. He expected the social welfare state in his own time. Indeed, given Paine's understanding of reason, rapid change was the logical outcome. For compelling that change was not a slow, gradual force, but an apocalyptic awakening of human consciousness.

Taking the mechanism of utopia into account, Paine is a far more problematic thinker than recent scholarship has portrayed. His later thought clearly diverges from the early following his shifting views toward Christianity. Those changes alone mean that there is no unitary, coherent philosophy to be found in the writings of Thomas Paine. Of more interest, Paine's mechanism of utopia is incompatible with his later creed of deism and his adherence to natural philosophy. Finally, his mechanism itself is too miraculous and fantastic to be believed. Paine's writing is a cautionary example to utopian political philosophy and to deistic thinking, for he attempts, but fails, to provide a sound explanation of how the utopia he compellingly describes is to come into existence according to the principles of deism which he espoused.

## **2. *Common Sense* and the Comprehensive Paine**

A few recent efforts have made the argument that Thomas Paine presents a comprehensive, coherent philosophy across his writings. However, synoptic accounts of the man's work fail to account for the shift in Paine's philosophy after *Common Sense* (Vickers; Fruchtman "Political Philosophy"). Arguing largely from the Bible, *Common Sense* presents evidence from a material

source eschewed in *Rights of Man* and thoroughly discredited *The Age of Reason*. Primarily, my argument is concerned with the fact of this shift, which is well-established in research (Viney), rather than the reasons underlying it. Indeed, preferring the later, more secular Paine, Ayer (40) writes with annoyance of the religious aspects of *Common Sense*: “In view of the want of respect he was later to show for the Old Testament, the first argument Paine brings against the institution of Kingship is scriptural.” The consequences of Paine’s shift are significant, if not frustrating. Given the shift of initially using the Bible as an authoritative source to then denouncing it as oppressive, scholars should not expect to find a coherent philosophy of across Paine’s body of writing. More pertinent to my larger argument is the rejection of original sin in this change and Paine’s consequent attempt to account for human wrong-doing in a system of deism and natural philosophy.

No pamphlet set the American colonies in the era of revolution aflame as did *Common Sense*. Written in colloquial language and propounding accepted beliefs, the pamphlet unleashed a wave of colonial anger and propelled the colonies to “their insistence on independence in 1776” (Ayer 31). The essence of the best-seller is a Christian attack on divine right, aristocracy, and hereditary rule. Spater (26) called the long essay an “orthodox Christian, though undenominational” attack on the system of government for the British Empire. Famously, *Common Sense* (4; vol. 1) declared that “society is in every state a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil.” With allusions to original sin (“Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built on the ruins of the bowers of paradise”), Paine (4-5; vol. 1) divided society from government as the human will is divided into the rightly-directed and wrongly-directed. Directed toward the good, human beings create the



blessings of society. On the other hand, the inherent defects of human nature require organized coercion in the form of government. “Here then is the origin and rise of government; namely, a mode rendered necessary by the inability of moral virtue to govern the world,” Paine (6; vol. 1) wrote. Working from the Christian conception of a fallen human nature, Paine cannot endorse a vision of perfected or utopian society, but he can propose revolutionary reforms in overthrowing monarchy and establishing a government of limit and consent. However, the enduring imperfectability of moral virtue will forever preclude a worldly utopia in Paine’s non-denominational, Christian thought.

Throughout, *Common Sense* calls only for a political revolution, not a moral or social one. The American colonies have the opportunity of throwing off the English Monarchy and escaping the British Empire. Through force of arms they may resist the oppressive authority of a distant and corrupt government and make laws for themselves. The political revolution will establish a government of right instead of violence (Paine 29-30; vol. 1). In overthrowing the old political system and establishing a new one, the colonials are acting only according to their prior beliefs. They are not elevating or introducing new ideals. *Common Sense* is not a utopian tract. Nor does the pamphlet espouse a perfected human nature or a perfected society. Paine desires a just political system, but he is still writing within the Christian context of original sin. No organization of social or political institutions can overcome human fallibility; moral virtue cannot secure a perfect social order. Because of humanity’s fallen nature, even the most just and righteous people consenting to the best government possible will not be perfectly good. To reiterate, original sin cannot be cured through political revolt, social change, or even moral enlightenment. Indeed, the concept of original sin distinctly restricts the possibilities of political

theory, reform, and utopia. Rejecting and replacing that concept has thorough-going effects as well.

Paine's later writing, especially *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*, does include more than the overthrow of a political system. After *Common Sense*, Paine's essays distinctly move away from Christianity and toward deism and natural philosophy. This transition creates problems for attempts to find a comprehensive, coherent philosophy across his body of work. Adhering to a doctrine known as *theophilanthropism*, Paine fused reason, science, and religion together into a comprehensive and deistic natural philosophy. In Paine's later writing, three ideas sharply contrast without apparent resolution, calling attention to a complex problem in his deist theology. Paine's dark view of human history, his optimism with regard to contemporary revolution, and his ultimate hope for the future of humanity stand in conflict. If human beings have been so bad, so ignorant, and so vicious for so long, what leads Paine to think the immediate future will be so positive, peaceful, and rational? Standing on the precipitous bank of humanity's long history of oppression, Paine constructs a bridge to the optimistic future of rational society. That bridge is not merely a political revolution, for that itself requires a trigger event. That signal event is the apocalyptic birth of reason, a sudden awakening or enlightenment that will fundamentally alter the way human beings perceive and pursue their self-interests. And yet, such an event is counter to the expectations of deism and natural philosophy.

Within deism, the laws of nature are set in motion at the beginning of the universe. There are no miraculous interventions in the natural world by a personal deity, for the deity is not a personality in deism (Viney 100). A sudden transformation of human reason makes little sense in Paine's own deistic natural philosophy. This complication bedevils his later thought, especially

given his rejection of *akrasia*, or weakness of will. Because he argues that those who know the good will do the good, Paine must argue that reason is the dominant force in human behavior, and its rapid spread will be irreversible. Once the good is known, human beings will enshrine it in law and diligently obey it - no backsliding. Of course, within a rational-mechanistic view of the world, there is no reason or motive to *not* do the good when it is known to the agent. The main problem with people is irrational beliefs about the good itself, and Paine argues throughout his later writings that the emergence and spread of rational knowledge will overwhelm irrational belief.

Applying his theory to his contemporary revolutions, Paine expected a rapid and worldwide change of the human condition. Now, a political progressive (Popper) can surely argue that conditions will improve with the steady application of reason to social problems over time. A more optimistic utopian (Inglehart and Welzel) can argue that over time the application of reason to economic production and distribution will create such a bountiful, affluent society such that the problems of scarcity cease to exist. But to argue that the faculty of reason has suddenly and irrevocably been transformed and perfected is conceptually distinct from slow or steady progress toward improvement. I have no objection to deism promoting the belief in gradual, progressive change, but Paine is not proclaiming a gradual change. The change of consciousness is apocalyptic and the change in society is revolutionary. In his writing, Paine thought humanity had changed and the utopia was at hand. The apocalypse of reason had ushered a utopian civilization.

### **3. Ignorance and Violence is the History of Humanity**

Humanity has a bleak record in Paine's account of history. Looking backward as far as the records show, Paine sees little to commend humanity. All history, Paine concludes, is the repression by some against the rest. Some use force in the guise of government; others use deception in the guise of revealed religion. Often, repressive government and deceptive religion unite in the form of established churches to dominate the many through the dual might of force and fraud. Despite the mythologies they create to legitimize their rule, governments and churches tend to be nothing more than institutionalized violence and deception, usually working in collusion to extract wealth from society. One can only wonder how such a state of oppression and deceit could be transformed rapidly into a political utopia.

Harkening back to the beginning of crude civilization, Paine (361; vol. 1) imagined the earliest peaceful herdsmen falling prey to "a banditti of ruffians." The violent conquerors subdued the countryside, established their power, and then "contrived to lose the name of Robber in that of Monarch" (Paine 361; vol. 1). Commiserating with the violent usurpers, "a set of artful men" assisted in the establishment of government through the creation of superstition (Paine 277; vol. 1). False priests ("false" being a redundant addition to Paine's understanding of the priesthood) pretended to consult oracles or "hold intercourse with deity," using deception to entrench the power of the government they served (Paine 277; vol. 1). Whereas *Rights of Man* spills the lion's share of its ink denouncing the governments of force, *The Age of Reason* shines its light on the deceptions and falsehoods of Christianity as a proxy for all revealed religions. Paine's disdain for the priesthood recurs throughout his letters (756-830; vol. 2). And these priests and practitioners of false religion are the main wielders of ignorance and superstition against reason (Ingersoll 190; Clark 141). In total, Paine identifies historical governments, with

the brief exception of ancient Athens (371-2; vol. 1), as corrupt, irrational, and oppressive, and indicts established churches as collaborators in that social oppression.

Nor can Paine blame these wicked deeds on some subset of humanity, for he wholeheartedly defends human equality as rooted in nature (Viney 88). Paine affirms his belief in essential human equality in *Rights of Man* as he excoriates Edmund Burke's critical prognosis for the French Revolution. Equality, Paine (272-3; vol. 1) argues, is not to be found among the parchments of a people's historical record. Of course, Edmund Burke contended the historical record of people is exactly where one finds all the rights, duties, and obligations of the governors and the governed. Paine and Burke fundamentally disagree on the source of rights and the reason for them (Browne; Fennessy; Dishman). Burke contends that rights are historical and organic to a people; Paine asserts the natural rights inherent to humanity. In other words, equality is an abstract, ahistorical, and essential characteristic of human beings as such (Paine 274-6; vol. 1). Like a principle of natural science, Paine understands equality as a fundamental law of creation. Human individuals, being of the same order in creation, all share in the essence of being human. No deed recorded in history, not the force of tyrants or the deception of charlatans, can undo the measure of equality instilled at the moment of creation. In Paine's estimation, equality is a truth evident to a rational mind. Of course, essential equality means that wicked deeds exhibited by one human being show the potential for wickedness in all. Equality means the good is as common to all as the bad.

Politically, Paine is far less abstract in his exposition of equality. The natural right of equality means that "every generation is equal in rights to the generations which preceded it, by the same rule that every individual is born equal in rights with his contemporary" (Paine 274;

vol. 1). In other words, no generation may establish binding law over another; no citizen or political group may exclude an individual from participation in government. The natural right readily translates into a political program. All individuals have the equal right to preservation, security, and government by consent. Paine (277-8; vol. 1) explicitly argues, against Burke, that legitimate political associations do not arise as a contract between government and the governed, but that individuals congregate into society and establish government through their consent. Each individual possesses an equal claim to natural rights and society owes the equal protection of political rights to all. Though not in Paine's clearest writing (276: vol. 1), he argues that the difference between natural rights and political ones is merely the translation process from abstract to practical principles. Again, the abstract idea of equality is simple and self-evident to a rational mind. However, Paine (398-9; vol. 1) understands that the science of politics is still new, that actual principles of good government must be effected through trial and error. A good analogy would be that the discovery of the principles of aeronautics did not include a blueprint for a flying machine; that is an engineering problem solvable through the abstract principles. Similarly, the emergence and understanding of human equality will begin the process of political experimentation to find the best system of government (Aldridge 320-2).

Equality as a fundamental condition of nature is used as a bludgeon against monarchy, aristocracy, and hereditary rule with devastating effect. Throughout both parts of *Rights of Man*, Paine demolishes the pretensions of his enemies as he levels their claim to rule. "Titles are but nick-names," Paine (286; vol. 1) wrote to disabuse the aristocracy of its grandeur. Titles carry no inherent truth, legitimacy, or value. Criticizing systems of government, Paine (366; vol. 1) wrote, "Hereditary succession is a burlesque upon monarchy. It puts it in the most ridiculous light, by

presenting it as an office any child or idiot may fill.” Ayer (31-2) rightly noticed that Paine used his principle of equality to promote meritocracy in the place of hereditary appointment, but equality is more than a pragmatic tool of political office assignment. Paine’s arguments against monarchy, aristocracy, and hereditary rule and for the equal rights of citizens descend directly from his concept of equality embedded in natural philosophy (Meng 286; Fruchtman “Apostle of Freedom” 225). However, Paine’s rebuke of aristocracy and monarchy, of the persons in government itself, often takes the form of dehumanization. Fruchtman (“Political Philosophy” 31-2) briefly acknowledges this unsettling moment in Paine’s writing, but does not consider the point at length. If Paine adheres to his concept of equality, those in government must be equal in their humanity to those in society. Holding to this concept of inherent equality, Paine surely can condemn those who act wickedly, but he could not hold the principle that some people are inherently wicked and others not. Nor did he. Indeed, Paine (256; vol. 1) risked his own safety to defend the person of Louis Capet, even as he deplored the monarchy of Louis XVI (Ingersoll 188-9). In his humanity, Louis was equal to Paine and all others. Only in the office of monarch was Louis corrupted and destructive. Removed of the office, the person was blameless and susceptible to reform through education. Given the disorder of the human world, Paine’s principle of equality means that everyone is potentially wicked and that none are privileged in nature.

#### **4. The Problem of Wrong-Doing**

Natural deism tends to root evil and disorder in the failure or absence of reason, and Paine follows suit in that respect. As Paine recounts the annals of history, reason (understood as the

force or motivator that compels obedience to natural law and the true self-interest of social harmony) seldom appears. When it finally bursts forth into the world, Paine comprehends it as a revelation. Reason illuminates the order of nature and enlightens humanity to its true interest. The force of reason will dispel ignorance in the minds of human beings, ending the brutality and deceit of governments and false churches forever. Reflecting on this, assessments of Paine as a social reformer or progressive champion utterly misconstrue the power within his concept of reason (Dyke; Meng; Fruchtman "Political Philosophy"). Paine is not merely a progressive or reformer. He does not expound a philosophy of gradual improvement or piecemeal development. Taking Paine's writing seriously, he is more like a prophet expounding a vision of the apocalypse and millennium. That the apocalypse is rational merely qualifies the vision.

Writing of the past, Paine finds mankind divided into the oppressed dupes and the oppressive tyrants. Writing of the present, Paine (398; vol. 1) notes an enigmatic change:

"From a small spark, kindled in America, a flame has arisen, not to be extinguished. Without consuming, like the *Ultima Ratio Regum*, it winds its progress from nation to nation, and conquers by a silent operation. Man finds himself changed, he scarcely perceives how. He acquires a knowledge of his rights by attending justly to his interest, and discovers in the event that the strength and powers of despotism consist wholly in the fear of resisting it, and that in order, '*to be free, it is sufficient that he wills it.*'"

The change is the awakening of reason in the minds of humanity. Reason reveals itself to pioneering colonists in the majesty of uncorrupted nature. The revelation is sudden and



permanent in the individual and the change is sweeping across the world. To reiterate, this transformation is beyond progressive change. Paine is arguing that the human mind is fundamentally altered from irrational and outwardly violent to rational and socially harmonious. This mechanism of change in the human mind itself will open the way for a political utopia. Thus, Paine can support amnesty for a former monarch, Louis Capet, whose mind will be awakened to the faculty of reason lying dormant within it. Paine sees humanity as experiencing more than a revolution in political principles or organization; the revolution is no mere change from absolute monarchy to constitutionalism. Paine is describing a revelation to humanity, an awakening of understanding and knowledge. With new-found reason, humanity will overthrow oppressive governments, disabuse deceptive religions, and reconstruct society according to reason and nature. The resultant political state is a utopia and the causal mechanism is the apocalypse of reason.

Nor can we disregard the apocalyptic event in Paine's thought without damaging his broader thought, for he needs an apocalyptic awakening of reason to resolve the disparity between natural order and historical disorder. Obviously, *The Age of Reason* demonstrated Paine was not willing to return to the Christian theology of origin sin to explain widespread moral failure in world of natural law. Scholarly research resounds on that point (Pearson; Aldridge; Proschaska; Fruchtman "Apostle of Freedom," "Religion of Nature," and "Political Philosophy"). Thus, something else must explain why in a world of natural order and rational deism human beings have displayed centuries of ignorance, deception, and brutality. Paine attributes the sad history of humanity to the absence of reason in the world. The revelation of reason to the isolated colonists in America began a new epoch. Being the supreme force in

nature, nothing will stop the spread of reason. The apocalypse will transform human consciousness and human civilization to usher in a new world of harmony and order.

## **5. Problems with the Apocalypse**

The apocalypse of reason certainly addresses the problem of human disorder and wrong-doing, but it undermines the very deism it is meant to bolster. A miraculous intervention in the world is contrary to the non-interventionist deism of natural philosophy, especially as it espoused by Paine. Yet, Thomas Paine held fast to a vision of reason suddenly awakening in a band of colonists as they behold the order and purity of nature. But how can such an event happen according to natural philosophy? If nature's rational laws have existed from the moment of creation, as with the principle of human equality, then why was humanity not knowledgeable of natural law from the moment of its creation? More confounding, why does the apocalypse of reason occur to European colonists in North America during the eighteenth century? Was this the first group of individuals in human history to behold nature apart from repressive government? Would reason not have been revealed to the native inhabitants of that pristine, natural setting? If reason is the strong force that Paine holds it to be, a prior awakening of reason would have traversed the world. Since no such transformation had occurred before his time, Paine must believe that America is the first and only place where reason has emerged. How uncanny that no human beings have ever beheld the beauty and purity of nature prior to the European colonization of America! One would think a band of natives, perhaps fleeing their own oppressive government, would have discovered reason first. Considering Paine's accounts of history and the apocalypse within a system of natural deism, one is at a loss for coherence. I

suspect that if Paine found his own account of reason's emergence written in a religious text, he would reject it as irrational mythology and deceptive superstition.

Ignoring the apocalypse, Paine's thought is readily transmuted into a rational, natural deism. For example, Fruchtman ("Political Philosophy" 10) condenses Paine's creed into the following: "Nature's God was the Creator of the universe and all that was in it. Never a deity whom one could successfully petition on a personal level..., God had created man in his image by giving him intellect not only to explore the mysteries of the world, but to improve his lot on earth. Man was, in effect, on his own to promote progress toward modernity..., or conversely, to halt progress." However, Fruchtman's analysis creates a coherent Paine at the cost of a comprehensive Paine, for his analysis is the spoliation of Paine's apocalypse. More complex is the problem of free will in a deistic world (Viney 100). Fruchtman, with the addendum of "to halt progress," contends that humanity, even in a state of reason, can act against natural law. On the contrary, Paine does not foresee human beings regressing once they start applying rational thought to social organization, for he denies *akrasia*. Paine (484-91; vol. 1), in *The Age of Reason I*, conceives of the world as a rational whole and of the Deity as the prime mover, "a first cause" of the rational whole. His disbeliefs include *akrasia*; meaning, people do not act against their rational conception of the good. Upbraiding Edmund Burke, Paine (352-3; vol. 1) wrote in *Rights of Man II*, "No man is prejudiced in favor of a thing, knowing it to be wrong. He is attached to it on the belief of its being right; and when he sees it is not, the prejudice will be gone." His endorsement of the French Revolution specifically declared that people fighting for rational and humane principles against the degrading principles of monarchy would keep the violence of the revolution to a minimum, and Paine (254-67; vol. 1) testifies to the restraint of

the populace in their seizure of the Bastille and subsequent events. Whether the history is correct or not, the man's principles are clear.

The belief in rational order combined with the denial of *akrasia* reflects back on Paine's account of reason as an apocalypse. If nature is rational, but people are acting irrationally, they must not possess reason. At least, they must not understand the true principles of reason, nature, and order; for possessing reason and understanding, people will not act against true principles. Granted, Paine allows for a short period of time wherein humanity will conduct scientific experimentation to learn how to best apply abstract principles to projects of worldly construction. Paine (396; vol. 1) wrote, "The best constitution that could now be devised... may be far short of that excellence which a few years may afford. There is a morning of reason rising upon, on the subject of government, that has not appeared before." Reason may be a revelation, but practical knowledge is not. In short order, human societies will apply their newly-awakened reason to political problems, discovering the most efficient means of securing individual happiness and social order. In this sense, Paine is progressive and utopian, but only after he is apocalyptic. Given that he is apocalyptic, how can he remain a deist?

## 6. Conclusion

Reading the transformation of Thomas Paine's principles from *Common Sense* to *Rights of Man*, *The Age of Reason*, and other later writings, synoptic accounts of his philosophy will not do justice to the shift in his thoughts. Furthermore, Paine's later political philosophy, though progressive and utopian, follow from a signal event in human consciousness, an apocalypse of reason. That event, the apocalypse of reason, is simply untenable within his own deistic belief

system and within deism itself. Recent scholarship that characterizes his theology as deistic and his politics as progressive overlooks his apocalyptic account of reason and the transformation of humanity prior to progress and utopia. The mechanism of his utopia, the apocalypse of reason, is a difficult bridge to cross, but necessary to traverse the gorge between his account of human history and his hope for humanity's future. Ultimately, Paine's natural philosophy cannot sustain all the elements he attempts to combine. Incoherence strikes when he merges a natural philosophy imbued with human equality to his pessimistic, though accurate, account of oppression in human history. To cross the divide between his pessimistic history and optimism for revolution- to make the utopia possible, rational, and imminent- Paine theorizes that reason had burst forth in the simple and pure wilderness of America. Uncorrupted by government oppression or church deception, a group of pioneers realized the good of nature. Reason awakened within them and they came to know the true principles of social organization. In rapid succession, reason was conquering the ignorance and brutality of human nature. Paine applied this mechanism of change, the apocalypse of reason, to his forecast of revolution, and saw utopia breaking over the horizon. Ultimately, that mechanism of change is out of place in deism, which only lends credence to the problematic and inconsistent political philosophy of Thomas Paine.

A review of Thomas Paine's utopianism forces political theorist to concentrate of the idea of the mechanism or agency of transformation. If utopia is to come into being, what will bring it into the world? What force, what agent, will change the flawed present into the perfected future? True utopianism can easily fall into the apocalyptic, as Paine did. But that fall can avoid detected if the utopian design is transmuted into a merely progressive design. Those who call Paine a progressive thinker ahead of his time overlook this problematic feature of his political scheme.

Furthermore, if progressive political thinkers can overlook the apocalyptic revelation of reason in Paine, might they be doing the same into their own thought? If reason cannot be found to bring about the utopia without an apocalypse, can it still be trusted to bring about true progress.

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